

Brendan Hardman – 2018 Invictus Games Captain

Brendan Hardman graduated from Balcatta Senior High School in 2004. He served in the Armed Forces and in 2018 was captain of the Australian Wheelchair Basketball team for the Invictus Games. This is his story.

“Balcatta SHS was an awesome school to go to. I first arrived in 2001 when I was in Year 9, It was term 2 of Year 9 and I stayed until graduation in 2004. I remember my first day sitting in class feeling like I didn't fit in at all! I had long red hair down past my ears, was wearing my baggy surf jeans and skate shoes and Balcatta, being the very multicultural school it is, I stood out massively. But I feel that's what made Balcatta such a great school to go to. It didn't matter what background you were from or how you dressed everyone seemed to accept you for who you were as a person.

The students weren't the only people that had an effect of my life though, I don't think I ever had a bad teacher at Balcatta. I would love to say that every teacher around Australia is excellent because I respect what they do so much, but that's not the case. However, the quality of teachers I had at Balcatta was incredible, even if I did frustrate them endlessly with my lack of attention and class clown attitude. Although I had awesome teachers there were two who had a huge impact on my life, Mrs Karen Byers, my History teacher and Mr Blitvich, I literally chose to study Human Biology in Years 11 and 12 just because he was teaching the subject and I sat at the same desk for 4 years straight in his classes. He gave me a great insight into creative thinking, exploring and questioning the nature of science, how to act and conduct myself as a young man, and the sciences behind the way the body functions, which would prove vital to me in the future.

I graduated in 2004, I didn't have the best direction if I were honest. My life goal was to become a certified tour guide and travel Europe working on Contiki Tours. I couldn't put my finger on what was missing in my life. That's when I realised it actually was the Army and serving my nation that I was missing and that became a reality and I was sworn in at Defence Recruiting in Perth and left that same day to The Royal Military College Duntroon in 2009. The Army was exactly what I was missing in my life. It gave me discipline, it gave me structure, it gave me a career and future but most of all graduating as a Lieutenant gave me an ability to lead which is something that I have always and still am passionate about. Leading soldiers both men and women is the greatest job I've ever had.

I was always kicking goals in my career but I first injured my back quite severely in 2011, I had to do some intensive rehab. to get myself fit again to deploy which I did, but over the next 4 years, just as I got back to peak fitness, I would injure it again and have to start over. From 2013 - 2017 I would go through my hell and it has been the most challenging period of my life thus far. Within 6 months I had completely ruptured the disc in my back in the same spot so we needed to take a more serious action to fix the issue. I had a spinal fusion and ended up with two titanium rods in my spine and they removed the disc completely. Subsequently, I was medically discharged from the Army in April, 2016.

In mid-2015, after struggling in silence for a long time, my wife, then fiancé, convinced me I needed to see someone so I booked an appointment with my GP and was diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety. I began to see a psychiatrist a couple of times a week and went on to even more medication to combat my mental health. I went into a deep spiral and my wake up moment was nearly taking my own life in 2017. It was then that I knew I had to try and kick the drugs and start to take my own life back again.

A week after this happened I started playing wheelchair basketball. I found something I could do, and I loved it. I didn't look back after that. I started to lose weight, I cut back on all of my medication and by December 2017, I was completely drug free (and still am) and I returned to full time work in November 2017.

The two biggest changes for me were that I started to take my mental health recovery seriously and actually applied the lessons I had learnt along the way, and the second was that no matter what I went through I never wanted to let myself get back to the stage of thinking about taking my own life again. I worked hard at my basketball and was eventually selected for the 2018 Invictus Games and was also named the captain of the wheelchair basketball team. Representing my country at Invictus was a great achievement and I'll try to get there again in 2020.

If I had any advice to young kids going through a mental health battle it would be to firstly, look after your mates, always check in with them if you know they're down and be the strength they need. Secondly, if you are struggling, understand that there is nothing wrong or unusual about suffering from mental health. You are completely normal. But don't ignore the signs, and if you are struggling reach out for help because what you're suffering from is much bigger than you and there is so much help out there for you. I can't do a lot of things I used to be able to now-a-days and people sometimes think that it's a disadvantage for me. But in truth I've never been happier or healthier in my life and I'm a better person for going through it."

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Team mates: Brendan Hardman with Brad Ness (captain) – Red Dust Heelers NWBL